DOSSIER: POPULATION

Grounds for cautious optimism?

Ernest Corea

The survival of the human race may ultimately depend on our ability to control our numbers before we run out of space, food and other resources. During the past two decades more and more people have become increasingly aware that there are . . . more and more people, an awareness that has triggered a growing concern with population issues. The pessimists make dire predictions, and warn that spaceship earth may soon be too overloaded to continue to support its passengers and crew. Some even advocate a "lifeboat" policy, where the rich survive in their enclaves, leaving the poor to sink or swim unaided. The optimists, equally concerned, though not always in agreement, organize world conferences to hammer out acceptable programs and policies, watch uneasily for new demographic trends, and talk in terms of "family welfare planning" and "contraceptive technology" rather than birth control.

For more than mere semantics, the IDRC must be counted with the optimists. Two of its program divisions — Population and Health, and Social Sciences — are directly concerned with family planning and population research. Since its inception in 1971, the Centre has provided support for more than 50 projects in these two areas. In 1974 the Centre began its Southeast Asia Population Research Awards Program (SEAPRAP), which has already made research grants to more than 40 young Asian scientists in this field.

This past year the Centre's Board of Governors approved one of the largest projects yet undertaken — grants totalling some $3 million to assist in a coordinated international effort, based in India, to develop new and better contraceptives. One of the most promising leads is a contraceptive vaccine that could also have applications in the fight against cancer.

The articles on the following six pages, then, are dedicated to the optimists. Not to the starry-eyed advocates of such schemes as mass interplanetary migration, but to those who have looked hard at the reality, and think they may have just glimpsed a point of light at the end of a long tunnel.

"Doomsday" was a buzzword popular among population watchers in the '60s. They warned anybody who cared to listen that a Malthusian nightmare was inevitable. Today, by contrast, in the second half of the '70s, there is optimism about how many — or how few — people will be around on planet earth of the future.

Herman Kahn has predicted that population growth rates will level off over the next 200 years. A current United Nations report on "The Future of the World Economy," says that "... growth of population is not an exponential process, or an exponential explosion, in which a constant growth rate is maintained."

Newspaper headlines reflect these hopes. "Biological time-bomb under control after all," "East Asia successfully curbs population growth," and "Population explosion now appears to be called off" are samples.

These changed expectations are based on reports that population growth rates have ebbed almost all across the world. Tragically, in some cases, the decline has been due to a rise in death rates. More propitiously, in other countries the drop was the result of carefully planned and resolutely applied population policies.

A comprehensive account of the new population trends, and what they imply, was prepared by Washington's Worldwatch Institute, "an independent non-profit research organization created to identify and to focus attention on global problems."

The Worldwatch Institute reported in October 1976 (Worldwatch Paper No. 8, *World Population: Signs of Hope, Signs of Stress*) that "sometime near the beginning of this decade, the rate of world population growth reached an all time high and then began to subside. At that point, the longstanding trend of accelerating population growth reversed itself. The world has passed the inflection point on the population curve."

The population growth rate of a country or region is the difference between its birth rate (number of births per thousand) and its death rate (deaths per thousand) expressed as a percentage. In the United States, for instance, the birth rate in 1975 was 14.8 per thousand, and the death rate 9 per thousand. The difference — 5.8 per thousand — worked out to a population growth rate of slightly over .5 percent.

In most parts of the world, the Worldwatch report said, population growth rates dropped between 1970 and 1975. In North America, the rate dropped from .9 percent in 1970 to .6 percent in 1975. The drop in Western Europe was from .56 percent to .32 percent; in East Asia from 1.85 percent to 1.18 percent, in Southeast Asia from 2.66 percent to 2.33 percent, in South Asia from 2.48 percent to 2.13 percent, in the Middle East from 2.88 percent to

2.72 percent, and in Latin America from 2.77 percent to 2.65 percent.

A contrary trend was noted in Eastern Europe where the population growth rate rose from .84 percent to .86 percent, and in Africa where the rise was from 2.61 percent to 2.71 percent.

Despite these deviations, the global trend was downwards. The overall world population growth rate, 1.9 percent when the decade opened, dropped to 1.64 percent in 1975. Thus, one year after the World Population Conference was held in Bucharest, the world had already improved on the target of a 1.7 percent growth rate that the conference set for 1985.

The world's population remained under four billion in the first half of this decade, rising from approximately 3.5 billion in 1970 to 3.9 billion in 1975. If this trend persists, it is possible that the Malthusian nightmare of eight billion of us scraping at the world's depleted resources by 2000 A.D. will not be experienced, after all.

Statistics are invariably controversial and, in some cases, unreliable. They can also be differently interpreted. Worldwatch figures are drawn mainly from census data provided to the UN by member-nations. A commentary in the *Financial Times* of London, England, has said that this "raw material" is "often a matter of taking the last known census and adding in some inspired guesswork." The US Office of Population interprets current figures to mean that "the world population total would be less than 5.5 billion by the year 2000." An executive of the UN Fund for Population Activities, using the same statistics, estimates that world population will be 6.25 billion by that date.

Reservations and controversy are useful correctives to the heady optimism usually evoked by any sign of improvement in the human condition. One should remember, however, that today's optimism is based on the same kind of data, from the same sources, that caused yesteryear's prophecies of doom. The improvement in the overall population situation might well be only a change from "bad" to "better," but that is a promising change nevertheless.

In the "developing" countries, the most dramatic drop in population growth rates of the '70s was in East Asia. China's record is the most remarkable. "The reduction in the Chinese birth rate from an estimated 32 to 19, or 2.6 points per year, is the most rapid ever recorded for a five-year span, besting the earlier reductions of nearly two points per year achieved by Taiwan, Tunisia, Barbados, Hong Kong, Singapore, Costa Rica, and Egypt," says the Worldwatch report.

There are obvious difficulties in counting heads in China where one-fifth of the world's people live. Not surprisingly, current estimates of China's population growth rate differ. The US Library of Congress puts it at 1.5 percent, Worldwatch at 1.1 percent, and the US Agency for International Development at 0.8 percent. Wherever the exact figure might lie, all available indications are that it is well below the 2.4 percent rate that a consensus of population studies established earlier in the '70s.

An assessment published last year by the International Planned Parenthood Federation suggests that China now has "the most effective and efficient large-scale and comprehensive population policy in the developing world." (For an account of "birth planning" policy and practices in China, see page 16).

Elsewhere, too, population policy is considered as crucial as, for instance, food production. Population policy consists of many strands, such as law, social reform, changes in the status of women, medical research, sociological research, communications programs, increased production and distribution of family planning devices, and so on. Indeed, despite the stereotype of the Third World's peoples as irresponsible, irrepressible multipliers of themselves, the fact is that many developing countries have, in recent years, displayed both a singlemindedness and a sense of innovation in their approach to population policy.

Singapore maintains an interlinked program of incentives and disincentives to promote family planning. Civil servants who are voluntarily sterilized are given seven days' leave with full pay. On the other hand, birth delivery charges in government hospitals are so graded that each additional child costs more. Some components of Singapore's population laws have been called "draconian," but they have been effective. Singapore has cut its population growth rate by half in 10 years. Two years ago the young city state achieved its objective of the two-child family as the national average, Dr. Margaret Loh, executive secretary of the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, said in a recent press interview.

Pakistan, where Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto said last year that population planning should be "given highest priority in the development initiative," has inaugurated a special system of old age welfare payments to parents, if either spouse is sterilized. **Egypt** increased social security and pension benefits, similarly, in 1974. Such measures reassure parents who look on children — particularly male children — as "insurance" for their old age.

South Korea gives preference for subsidized housing to a family whose "head" has undergone a vasectomy or sterilization.

The **Philippines** Labour Law allows paid maternity leave to a woman worker only up to her fourth delivery. In the same spirit, income tax deductions for children cease when a family has more than four. Tax laws have also been integrated with population policy in South Korea, where the number of "tax deductible" children is limited to three; and in **Indonesia**, where the number of dependents counted for tax deduction has been reduced from 10 to seven.

The Indian state of **Maharashtra** (population: 50.4 million) passed a compulsory sterilization law last July, making sterilization mandatory after the third child. The law has since been amended: a fourth child is now permitted, where all three children born before were of the same sex.

Throughout Asia, volunteer workers, traditional midwives and public health staff, carry the message and the mechanics of population planning deep into rural areas. A public health doctor has in **Sri Lanka** opened a pilot family planning clinic in a village temple, the fount of village wisdom and the centre of village life, with the support and co-operation of the resident monk. Both **India** and **Bangladesh** have married the age-old art form of puppetry with modern electronic technology to disseminate information about population. **Iran** operates a network of community welfare centres offering a variety of activities that range from literacy classes to family life education and family planning services.

Backing up these and other aspects of population policy in developing countries, are continuing research programs that are meant to make population planning scientific, safe, and non-traumatic, both socially and psychologically. The IDRC has supported several of these programs — all of them devised by developing country researchers in terms of their own national needs and aspirations. Over the long term, the results of these research programs may be the most useful of the various elements that constitute the current approach of developing countries to population policy. □

Photo: Clyde Sanger

Singapore: the two-child family is now the national norm.

Former journalist Ernest Corea, from Sri Lanka, is associate director of the IDRC's Publications Division, responsible for the Centre's public information program.